DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 485 HE 015 845

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TITLE The Pendulum Swings: A Self-Correcting Process in Colleges and Universities. SAIR Conference Paper.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research (Birmingham, AL, October 28-29, 1982).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *College Administration; *College Curriculum; *College Environment; *Decision Making; Employment Practices; Higher Education; Institutional Research; *Personnel Policy; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *SAIR Conference

ABSTRACT

The self-correcting process in higher education, which provides a basis for predicting institutional decisions related to personnel, curriculum, and the environment, is discussed. Since group process is important to influencing personnel decisions in higher education, the institutional researcher can make predictions based on the actions of search, tenure, and promotion committees. A brief case example demonstrates the attempt of faculties to balance leadership, a powerful element of the self-correcting process. Two examples are also presented of institutional responses to tenure issues and demands for career-oriented programs. It is suggested that the process of questioning what type of programs should be offered by colleges is important to the self-correcting process, since the competition for high technology industry among states is anticipated to influence college curriculum development. In addition, many institutions have reinstituted core curriculum requirements. The institutional environment includes communication, problem-solving, administrative style, and the way that information is collected, maintained, and reported. For 13 issues pertaining to personnel, curriculum, and the environment, potential implications of two contrasting college environments are identified. (SW)

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# The Pendulum Swings: A Self-Correcting Process in Colleges and Universities

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Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the
Southern Association for Institutional Research
Birmingham, Alabama
October 28, 1982

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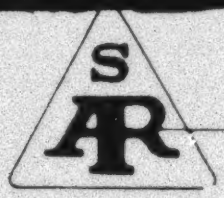


SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the 1982 Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research held in Birmingham, Alabama, October 1982. It was reviewed by the SAIR Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research in higher education. This paper has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of Conference Papers.

Gerald W. McLaughlin
President, SAIR

Abstract

The Pendulum Swings:
A Self-Correcting Process in Colleges and Universities

A review of history reveals that human beings govern themselves in many ways. Democratic societies change over time or in revolutions and become dictatorships. Dictatorships fall and democracies rise in their place. Fanaticism replaces reason and reason is replaced by insanity. So is the life-cycle of politics.

It is not surprising, then, to find higher education continually experiencing cyclical change. Poor professors are usually pushed and prodded into other occupations. Continuing education courses that do not meet public needs are replaced by those courses which do meet needs, or in some institutions make a profit. And governance syles change. Repressive secretive administrations usually do not last over a long period of time; they frequently are replaced by administrators who adhere to collegial values.

This cyclical activity is seen as a valuable self-correcting process by many involved in higher education. Walker (1979) and Dressel (1981) believe that this self-correcting process continues to work within the collegial management of higher education and the leadership must be gamesmen in this process if they are to be successful institutional leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to transmit knowledge and provide examples of the self-correcting process important to the institutional researcher. This knowledge assists the researcher in predicting an institutional climate and direction, identifies potential areas of stress and needed research, and allows time to contemplate anticipated crisis studies. Through the Institutional Research Office and appropriate administrators, knowledge of the self-correcting process may provide for managed change within the institution, rather than catastrophic uncontrolled reaction.

The Pendulum Swings: The Self-Correcting Process in Colleges and Universities

Institutional research is produced for administrators who operate within an environment influenced and changed by diverse and sometimes conflicting social, political and economic forces. The ultimate challenge to the researcher is to have his products influence the policy and direction of the institution through the appropriate responsible administrators. If these products are congruent with or related to the forces that buffet administrators, they are likely to have more of an impact upon the direction of the institution than research projects produced without adequate knowledge of the climate in which the work must serve.

A knowledge of the institution is important; to be able to predict trends, as well as potential areas of institutional research, is a great advantage to those who direct or coordinate the planning and research functions. A knowledge of the apparent self-correcting process in higher education provides a basis for projections and predicting institutional decisions related to personnel, curriculum, and the environment surrounding all who attempt to advance the goals of the institution.

Communication processes, problem solving, policy formulation, administrative style, and collection and use of information are a sample of factors which can be used to detect patterns in the institutional environment. Assessing these patterns assists researchers and planners in anticipating future information requested of institutional administrators. A knowledge of the self-correcting process is a valuable tool which can be applied by those who seek to advance their institution.

## Personnel

Staffing. Group process is a most important factor which influence personnel decisions in higher education. Search, tenure and promotion committees play various roles within each institution, but in most institutions their impact is significant. It is through the actions of these personnel committees that an institutional researcher can predict one aspect of the self-correcting process. One case example illustrates the important role faculty play in initiating or participating in the self-correcting process.

> Institution A has had little turnover in administrative positions. In fact, 90% of the chairmen, deans, and vice presidents have held their positions for three or more years. The president has held his position more than ten years. The institution has been described as being "stable," "successful," "stagnant," or not open to change. Throughout the history of the institution most advancement has been made by promoting from within. The philosophy of the institution has not changed substantially in many years.
>
> Concurrent with this stable internal environment loom external dark clouds of limited financial resources, tenure questions, and governance issues.
>
> A faculty search committee is appointed to fill an important administrative position. Their choices reflect various candidates who are quite different from tradition. They are from other institutions and are far more liberal than those currently employed at Institution A.

This case example demonstrates one very powerful element of the self-correcting process: the attempt of faculties to balance leadership. Their efforts to instill change and to guard the institution against the challenging external forces may or may not prove successful, but they are part of the balancing of the self-correcting process.

A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education (Nichols, September 1, 1982) describes a trend as institutions of higher education to choose administrators who ride alone.

> "Academe seems either to suffer from very indecisive leaders or, like the business world, to employ chief executives who see themselves as "Lone Ranger" bosses who are paid to make the tough, quick decisions. These rapid-fire commanders tend not to last very long. Their hasty, uninformed decisions often backfire, and they may spend months mending shattered morale and back-pedaling in a fashion that eventually destroys their dynamic image. Nevertheless, the Lone Ranger is probably our dominant leadership model."

This Lone Ranger syndrome shows an apparent trend for institutions to hire gunslingers to solve the higher education dilemmas of the decade. This hiring practice would suggest that many search committees at very different institutions are attempting to improve their administration in the same way.

Take a moment and on line (1) predict one general characteristic of the next senior administrator chosen to work at your institution:

(1) Group Facilitator<----------->Lone Ranger

Blacken the arrow tip to indicate the anticipated direction you expect to be the trend for future hirings at your institution.

Tenure. During the late sixties and early seventies many faculty were completing the number of years necessary to be considered for the awarding of tenure. Tenure committees met and often recommended tenure for everyone who was eligible. Today, the approach is quite different as exemplified by a case study at Institution B:

Institution B, a small private liberal arts college with a young faculty, had been challenged by decreasing enrollments, programs of only moderate recruitment value, and continuing budget deficits. The faculty, under the leadership of the dean, decided that the old tenure policy was of little value to a college of this type. The institution would have to be responsive to develop new programs, and could not afford to tenure faculty assigned to low enrollment programs. The faculty voted the old tenure plan out and instituted a series of continuing faculty contracts which would be granted for one, three or five year periods.

The faculty cooperated with the administration and chose the appropriate self-correcting process. Perhaps the solution to the tenure problems is not similar to the approach chosen at Institution B, but the decisions of tenure committees at many institutions would suggest that a larger percentage of those who apply for tenure will not be awarded it in the future.

Promotion. Faculty committees are not recommending promotion at the same rate that existed several years ago. With the stability of most faculties, the limited economic resources available, and the growing percentage of associate and full professors, it is becoming more and more difficult for the faculty to advance in rank. Again, the pendulum swings. On lines (2) and (3) place the anticipated decisions of your institution in the next three to five years.

(2) <----------> 
Few Tenure Many

(3) <----------> 
Few Promotion Many

## Curriculum

Diversity. College curricula have multiplied and become both diverse and specialized. Career-oriented programs have been a major part of the growth. Liberal arts colleges have expanded into fields of study that would have been viewed as outside of their mission a few years ago.

> Institution C, a junior college, was faced with dwindling enrollments and extreme financial pressure. The majority of course offerings were in the traditional areas of English, math, history, etc. The college expanded the number of courses offered in business management, early childhood, real estate and secretarial sciences. Today, the college is experiencing record enrollment, many applications, and a sound financial condition.

With the growth of career programs have come many questions related to the curricula appropriate for various institutions of higher education. What type of program should be offered by junior colleges, senior colleges, and universities? What type of programs should be offered by postsecondary vocational institutions? This questioning period appears to be a very important element of the self correcting process; it is a signal that the trend is reaching its limit. On line (4) blacken the arrow to indicate the anticipated direction of new programs at your institution.

New Program

(4) <----------> 
Liberal Studies No change Career Oriented

There is a decrease in both the number of new programs proposed as well as the number of new courses included in the curriculum at the same universities. On the following continua, indicate what you believe is happening at your institution:

New Program

(5) <----------> 
Decrease No change Increase

New Course

(6) <----------> 
Decrease No change Increase

High technology. A powerful force has started the pendulum swinging in one curriculum area. The competition for high technology industry among states (which envision their own Research Triangle or Silicon Valley) is anticipated to influence curriculum development in higher education. Just as a masters degree in business administration was the goal of many students in the seventies and early eighties, so too degrees in applied technology are expected to be the goals of tomorrow. Engineering, technology, biomedical technology, electromechanics, robotics, telecommunication, and avionics are but a few of the highly specialized curriculum areas which will be developing in the future. A paper presented by Nathan Dean (1982) cited a report of the organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which predicted a new generation of industries. According to the report, "four technological adventures are underway: in electronics (teleprocessing and automation); in biology, with a whole array of effects on health and on agricultural and industrial activities; in energy production, with the development of alternative sources of primary energy; and finally in the use of oceans and space." Do you anticipate any of the new growth fields having an impact on your state or institution?

Core Requirements. During the gregarious sixties, many schools allowed great flexibility and student choice in selecting previously structured core programs. Institutions reevaluated the required English, history, math, and science requirements and allowed a variety of different courses to meet the core requirement. Some schools almost abandoned previously held traditions. However, the pendulum has reversed its direction once again, and many institutions have core requirements quite similar to the curriculum they had in 1950. Which way does the pendulum swing at your institution?

Core Requirement

(7) <----------> 
Few choices No change Many choices

Communication

The cycle of communicating involves a stimulus, a medium for transmittal, a message, a receiver and a monitoring element. Personnel selection and curriculum are two elements of the basis for much of the communication within an institution. People send and receive the message which is often related to curricular matters. Communication assists or interferes with problem solving and policy formulation. On the following continua please descrive the formality and directionality of the communication process at your institution.

Communication

(8) <----------> 
Formal Informal

(9) <----------> 
One way Interactive

## Problem Solving

Another aspect of an institutional environment is problem solving. Some institutions appear to be in a continual state of crisis. Yet, other institutions on the very brink of disaster operate in a very calm environment and within a plan of action. Describe your institution on line ten.

### Problem Solving

(10) <----------> 
Crisis management — Calm and planned

## Administrative Style

Dressel (1981) describes many attributes of effective and ineffective administrators. One excellent attribute of an administrator is a concern for those who work at the institution. On line eleven use your best judgement to describe your administration.

### Administrative Attributes

(11) <----------> 
Self — Others

The final example, although there are many others, is the manner in which your institution collects, maintains, and reports data. How does your institution measure up on the following dimensions?

Data Collection

(12) <---------- >
Closed — Wide open

Data Reporting

(13) <---------- >
One — The world

Having completed this initial assessment of thirteen factors relatrd to your institution, it is appropriate to consider the implications for the Office of Institutional Research. Table 1 provides a sample of implications for each continuum. You will note that space has been provided to allow you to add information helpful to your particular setting.

Table I
Implications of Your Assessment

| Potential Implications | Continua | | | Potential Implications |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Staffing | | |
| Process rather than product oriented | (1) | Group Facilitator | Lone Ranger | "Number crunching" Strong budget-plannin relationship Centralized focus |
| | | Tenure | | |
| Predicting faculty retirement | (2) | Few | Many | Quality faculty emphasis |
| | | Promotion | | |
| Faculty salary studies | (3) | Few | Many | P. R. emphasis |
| | | New Program | | |
| Examine curriculua of other colleges which are stressing a liberal curriculum | (4) | Liberal Studies | No change / Career Oriented | Graduate follow-up job and pay studies |
| | | New Program | | |
| Cost analysis work | (5) | Decrease | No change / Increase | Potential program income studies |

| Implications | Continua | Implications |
|---|---|---|
| | **New Course** | |
| Retrenchment | | Marketing studies |
| | (6) <----------> | |
| | Decrease — No change — Increase | |
| | **Core Requirement** | |
| Value of foreign language "basic skills" achievement emphasis studies | | Advisement studies |
| | (7) <----------> | |
| | Few choices — No change — Many choices | |
| | **Communications** | |
| Governance studies | | Interview and opinion methodology |
| | (8) <----------> | |
| | Formal — Informal | |
| Emphasis on confidentiality | | Group study design |
| | (9) <----------> | |
| | One way — Interactive | |
| | **Problem Solving** | |
| Reviews of national literature related to "hot" issues | | Planning work, demographic studies of institutions and students |
| | (10) <----------> | |
| | Crisis Management — Calm and Planned | |

| Implications | Continua | Implications |
|---|---|---|
| | **Adminstrative Attributes** | |
| Salary comparisons | (11) <----------> Self ... Others | Faculty/staff development studies |
| | **Data Collection** | |
| Special "pet" projects of senior personnel | (12) <----------> Closed ... Wide-open | Research office involved in design of own annual work plan |
| | **Data Reporting** | |
| Confidentiality<br>Value of data for self-gain | (13) <----------> One ... The world | Marketing, P.R. focus |

Please complete and return to speaker.

Position of Respondent _____

Institution (check one)

_____2 year _____4 year _____Masters Level _____Doctoral Granting

State in which institution is located _____

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